

Chapter I
Hollow
(1927)

From the window of our tiny Berlin flat, I could see a line of shops. There was the apothecary we visited when our need for medicine outweighed our need for food. There was the bakery where we bought bread because the baker gave us a good price, as he knew we were usually too poor to afford meat. There was the tailor's shop that sometimes gave Mama free scraps of textile and bought needles and thread to mend the clothes we could not replace. There was an old and empty carapace of a business that once belonged to a shoemaker until he fought for his country and came back with no hands, nor one leg for that matter. I called that shoemaker Papa.

We lived comfortably before that. We were never rich, but Papa made excellent shoes in his prime, and people knew it. He worked hard and had no qualms about bringing his craft home with him. He told me when I was a boy that a man's work was his duty, as it affords him the means for his family. When we went to war, he became grim. Even at the age of six I could see the change in him.

"Papa, what's wrong? Are you afraid of going to war?" I asked.

"*Nein, mein Sohn,*" he answered. "I am not afraid to fight. I owe our country for all it has given us. What I fear for is all that can come with war. You and your mother will have to work hard to make money with me away. It will take time to bring my customers back to the shop once I've returned. Most of all, I fear that the fighting will come here, but I will be out there to stop that. Now you'll do everything you can to help your mother while I'm away, won't you, Dolf?"

"*Ja, Papa.* I will."

I remember how Papa used to sing before the War. There were deep swells in his singing voice which made his harsher, almost nasal vibrato endearing in its own way. He sang while he worked and for holidays and festivals, but my fondest memories of his singing come from when he would put me to bed as a boy. I would get under the covers and lie on my stomach, and Papa would rub his hand in circles over my shoulders while he sang. His songs almost never put me to sleep, but I enjoyed it so much that he sang me one song every night until he left for the war.

With Papa gone, Mama became responsible for making most of the money. At my age, I could hardly find a suitable job to offer any substantial support, but I tried to do what I could. Much of the time I was tasked with the housework since Mama worked such long hours. I did not have much time to play with other children since my time was spent around the house and doing odd jobs for neighbors when they were available. We managed to keep the house until Papa returned midway through the War.

When my father came home, I did not recognize him at first sight. In fact, I hid from the maimed creature I saw bound to a wheelchair. It was covered in bandages and bruises, with only

a leg fully intact. I thought it was some kind of monster. Then Mama wailed aloud and wrapped her arms around it, sobbing.

“This is how they give my husband back to me!” she cried over and over.

As I heard this, I crept towards the mangled figure in the chair and stared at him. My brain worked as if assembling a puzzle, but none of the pieces I saw seemed to belong in the final picture of Papa. We made eye contact, and at first the person in front of me still seemed to be a stranger. Then something, some part of the man I knew, flashed for a moment and was gone just as quick. I ran away from him to some distant corner in another room, far from anything and everything, where I curled into myself and wept.

My father never sang after that. He barely even spoke. He communicated in brief grunts for days at a time, only forming full words when absolutely necessary. When he did speak, the voice that came out seemed foreign. Sometimes I mistook it for an unknown guest, or even an intruder. Where the depth of his voice once carried a warmth with it, like that of his breath on my face when he would speak to me on his lap, there was now an emptiness. It was as if every word he spoke had traveled through a barren gauntlet to be filled with holes by bullets and bayonets, losing so many pieces that it was not Papa anymore by the time it reached us.

I knew that, fundamentally, he was still my father. When Mama began including me in the duties to take care of my father I did not protest. I even believed for a time that my help might bring back Papa. Even if his leg remained missing and his arms merely two uneven stumps, just to have his voice back would have been enough. Each new duty became a test of whether or not I could revive him. When I was a boy, these chores were as simple as feeding him while Mama washed the neighbors' clothes for extra money. By the time I was sixteen, I was responsible for his whole morning routine.

I started sleeping very lightly, as the beginnings of my days came to correspond with the rising of the sun. My days began when I woke and rushed through my basic grooming before moving to my father's room. Mama rose upon my arrival and got straight to whatever work she'd managed to bring in while I lifted my father out of bed. First, I would help him relieve himself. Second, I bathed him. After that, I helped him dress and move to the kitchen table before finishing dressing myself. Moving my father around became much easier once we moved into our small flat. Our old home had more rooms and was much larger, but I had not seen it since I was eight. Our flat's dining room, kitchen, and living room were all one and the same. My parents occupied the bedroom, and I slept in the corner of our main room. Our bathroom consisted of a toilet and a copper tub and opened beside my parents' bedroom door, which helped when moving my father.

Mama made breakfast on the mornings she had not brought in any extra work, but the task usually fell to me. It was easy enough. Most of the time all we had was bread or porridge to start the day, which forgave the absence of any talent in cooking to call my own. Mama took her bath after our meal. Sometimes I felt guilty that she had the last turn in the bathwater.

During the day, I tried to sell newspapers to passersby around the busiest shops and restaurants. The word “*Zeitung*” became so engrained in my tongue that I probably mumbled it

in my sleep. I returned to the flat periodically to check on my father until Mama returned home in the early afternoon. Her arrival left me a few hours to dedicate solely to peddling papers, which was good since my boss, Herr Amsel, based much of my pay on my sales. Whenever I asked to learn the managerial or office work, he laughed at me.

“Herr Gruber lets his business go and die, and now he sends his son to kill mine!” he said. Each time he treated it like a joke, but there was always the unshakeable feeling that the bite was intentional.

My family ate dinner when I returned home, after the shops closed. Mama always made dinner since we saved our best food for it. Occasionally we were lucky enough to have a bit of meat, but usually she made a vegetable soup. Somehow Mama devised ways to change the flavors of each soup night after night so that we could always look forward to it. At least she and I did; my father never ate much after he came home.

In the evenings, Mama helped my father stretch what was left of his limbs in their room to try and keep him from getting too stiff. His inactivity caused him pain as different joints ceased to move the way they once had or began bearing too much of his weight too often. We tried to get him medicine, but it was expensive. That, and Mama confessed to me that she worried my father may have become reliant on the drugs.

While she stretched him out, I sat at the table to draw. The earliest drawing of mine that we had was from before my father went to war. It was a juvenile depiction of him soling a shoe, but we held onto it regardless. I gave it to my father as a gift before he left, and he kept it with him in the War. Mama found it in a pocket of his uniform when he returned and put it in the drawer of his nightstand. And that is where it stayed.

In my adolescence, I usually tried to copy the images I found on newspapers as closely as I could. Sometimes I even made my own additions to the pictures, like changing the expressions on people’s faces or adding other subtle details. I was picky about which photographs I copied. Pictures of people in uniforms turned me away. Those of proud business owners and families standing together were much better. I really loved finding pictures of the countryside. Sometimes when I drew them, I would add a cottage, one with smoke coming from the chimney so you knew that someone was home, that someone could actually live there—as I wanted to.

Every so often, I would copy a photo I did not like. I did it to test myself. What was the use of drawing if I could only draw a few things? It did not always work though. Once I tried to copy a military man in uniform. The photo looked so dignified. I wanted to be the man in that uniform. He stood straight with an expression that was blank but full of power. It was as if he could jump in an instant from his stance to the offensive, ready for anything to come his way. I duplicated his head, shoulders, and torso perfectly. When I tried to draw the first arm, I stopped where my father’s did. I tore up the copy with the original.

It was spring. The days were getting warmer, and we worried less each day about the risk of sickness winter brought. I returned to the flat to check on my father one more time before Mama returned from work. As I climbed the stairs to our floor, I heard bumps working their way through the walls of the old, worn-out building. The key jammed when I went to open the door,

and I had to rattle it for some time before it turned and freed the lock. When I closed the door, I heard the sound of glass breaking. It came from my parents' room. I ran in, imagining some vandal had thrown a brick through their window. I opened the door to my father squirming on the sill.

The remaining glass cut into his belly, dripping blood down the wall and spattering some on the floor. He writhed around, scrambling to move, but it took time for me to realize that he was working his way out and not in. The glass was broken off at about the level his head would be if he were to stand. The grim thought of him hopping back and forth into the window on one leg encroached on my mind, but I pushed it away as quickly as I could. It occurred to me that I had been standing dumbstruck as my father twisted himself further and further out the window. I rushed to grab hold of his leg, but just as my fingers brushed his ankle, he went.

I stuck my head out of the frame and shouted for him. It happened so fast there was not even time for a tear to bud or to turn my head away. His head made contact first, sending the rest of his body limp. His spine almost seemed to begin folding before his torso's own weight tipped him to one side. All the while his one leg flailed like that of some grotesque marionette tossed aside by its puppeteer. For that split second I was glad he had no other limbs. His blood pooled, and a crowd formed at a distance. I ran down to the street out of a sense of duty but was terrified to look at him. My steps slowed by their own accord the closer I got. He was facing away from the door to the flat, but something drove me to circle him until I saw his face.

He looked no different from the day he came home.